

Left Unsaid: Deconstructing the Rhetoric of Liberal Feminism's Failure to Comment on the Worth of Women's Lives

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ABSTRACT: Postmodernism is typically thought to be problematic in the explication of traditional logics embracing the dignity of human life. Nonetheless, it is possible and useful to use postmodern rhetorical techniques to observe the deficiencies of liberal feminism's failure to account for female life. The recent case of Terri Schiavo has highlighted the rhetorical limitations of traditional feminism. The failure of the feminist left to comment on Schiavo's vulnerability and worth as a woman exposes a strategic failure of this movement's alleged representation of women's interests. This paper seeks to broadly explore the strategic absences of feminist text in articulating "women's interests." This study examines four contemporary failures of feminist critique: sex-selection abortion, Taliban degradation of women, the dehumanization of Terri Schiavo, and the recent murder of Theo Van Gogh. The purpose of this technique is to demonstrate how contemporary techniques of study like postmodernism can ironically enable a broader and more stable reality of dignity for human life—particularly for women.

The past four years have witnessed an array of important public events relating to the worth of women. The ongoing violence of sex-selection abortion, the military defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the radical dehumanization of Terri Schiavo, and the vicious murder of Theo Van Gogh all indicate public events upon which the worth of women was of key symbolic importance. Observers might expect feminists to make abundant comments about these events in defense of women. An extended silence on the matter is instead offered by conventional

feminists. The extended silence leaves an interpretive question to the pro-life community: What is the meaning of this silence by feminists? Innovative critical communication theories can help elaborate this meaning. Rhetorical studies in communication tell us that rhetoric is the faculty of observing in any given situation all available means of persuasion. This paper rhetorically analyzes the persuasive impact of feminist silence on key social events. The unusual strategy of silence requires special tools of critical analysis recently developed within the field of communication.

Recent innovations in communication criticism emphasize the philosophy of postmodernism. The philosophy of postmodernism emphasizes the inherent chaos of reality. The postmodern view of communication suggests that symbols inherently mask the intrinsically disordered nature of existence with pretentious symbols of order. These symbols of order are misleading and demonstrably unstable. Among the more prominent examples of such techniques is deconstruction. This technique, usually ascribed to French writer Jacques Derrida, places an emphasis on critical inquiry into the unspoken aspects of texts.¹

In this view, analysis of texts is confused by attention to the spoken, articulated, and discursively assigned symbols of a piece of communication. Such a critical focus, according to the deconstructionist, is a distortion since symbols function more to distort and hide meaning than to provide meaning. A more meaningful analysis can be obtained by attending to the unspoken and unseen aspects of messages. The most common example of this technique in practice is the insistence on gender neutral language. The use of a generic "he" has been recognized as suppressing a subtext of "she." The appending of "she" to most generic designations of "he" is a byproduct of deconstructive inquiries into the functions of language. A more conversational language example is a December greeting of "Happy Holidays." Such greetings within the

¹ W.A. Covino and D. Jolliffe, *Rhetoric: Concepts, Definitions, Boundaries* (Needham Heights MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1995).

Christian community can elicit a sense that “Merry Christmas” is a subtext that is being avoided. The orderly symbols of “Happy Holidays” obscures this hidden subtext.

The dilemma of unspoken subtexts establishes a critical project for adherents of deconstruction. The deconstructionist critic reveals the unspoken aspects of texts. Their postmodern projects focus on surfacing the unspoken aspects of texts. This potentially endless process exposes the instability of texts. Such a technique reminds readers of the inherent instability obscured by symbolic orders such as language.

Contemporary feminist advocacy is a suitable communication domain for deconstruction. Feminist organizations such as the National Organization of Women profess to speak for women collectively. Moreover, they profess to emphasize the inherent value of women. This analysis presents a postmodern deconstruction of feminist absences in the following social artifacts: (1) sex selection abortion, (2) Terri Schiavo, (3) Taliban oppression, and (4) the Van Gogh murder.

RHETORICAL ARTIFACT #1: ABORTION AS SEX-SELECTION

Globally, there are 45 million abortions each year, according to the United Nations Family Planning Association.² The majority of these abortions are against female children. Moreover, these abortions are in many cultures a form of deliberate killing aimed at destroying women before they are born. Were these children considered fully human by abortion advocates and providers, they would likely be viewed as victims of hate crimes. In China and India, sex-selection abortion against

² S.K. Henshaw, S. Singh, and T. Haas, “The Incidence of Abortion Worldwide,” *International Family Planning Perspectives* 25 (1999) Supplement: 30–38.

female children is a widespread practice. In fact, China this past year passed laws attempting to put an end to the practice that the authorities previously denied was happening.³ Given that more than 20 million female children each year are dying in this social practice, it seems a likely artifact of feminist critics.

Feminism has described abortion as integral to the advancement of women's rights. The "right to control her own body" has become a cultural cliché in feminist communities. Because women become pregnant and bear the difficulties associated with pregnancy, feminists have predominately articulated a view that abortion should be legal as a solution to the problem of pregnancy. A sample of NOW abortion rights advocacy is provided in the paragraph below concerning a 2004 political march for abortion rights:

Why You Should March

. . . . With your participation, the March for Women's Lives will prove that we are a force to be reckoned with and will launch a powerful new campaign to protect our rights on every front.

Be a Part of History

We are Marching for Women's Lives to demand political and social justice for women and girls regardless of their age, race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, economic status, sexual orientation or ability. This March is for young and older women, straight women and lesbians, sons and fathers, able and disabled, rich and poor—to stand side by side in a show of unity and determination.

We are prepared to protect our right to abortion, birth control and all reproductive health services, as well as our right to have children and plan our own families without government interference. We will never go back to the days before *Roe v. Wade* when women died from illegal abortions.

³ "Chinese City Battles Birth Problem," UPI, 17 February 2005.

Marches can make a difference. The March for Women's Lives will be a galvanizing event at a critical time in our nation. This may be the day we all look back on and say, "That's when we turned the corner toward winning full reproductive rights for all women."⁴

This NOW webpage explains why women should march to defend the right of abortion in April 2004. An important subtext in this message is the impending election of November 2004. Additionally, this text relies on rights-talk—the description of a social process in political terms. *Roe v. Wade* is reified as the bright line of history—a point that cannot be reversed. Reproductive rights is a term that provides an umbrella for birth control and other unspecified services. It reduces the rhetorical need to use the more provocative term "abortion." Abortion seems to be one of many services provided and perhaps not a significant one in practice. It is a march "for women and girls regardless of their age...." The age notation leads a series of legal categories designed to elicit a sense of inclusion from the reader. "Regardless of their age" does not include before they are born. Reproductive rights are in danger, and a powerful response is needed to protect the endangered rights. From the rhetorical perspective of the National Organization of Women and other similar contemporary feminist groups, the legal access to the destruction of human life is guaranteed by the symbolic effects created by "rights talk." The double speak is apparent in regard to age discrimination, since a human child prior to birth can be easily discriminated against within this symbolic framework.

⁴ "Why You Should March," NOW website, 22 May 2005: <http://march.now.org/whywemarch.html>.

Because human beings are erased from our social consciousness by terms such as “abortion rights” that obscure the target of the abortion, discrimination becomes an activity of “motion” rather than “action.”⁵ If parents want to choose a child who is male rather than female, the technology is in practice to provide for this discrimination by parents. The global record is clear that this preference is expressed in millions of abortions every year. The majority of abortions are against women. Throughout Asia, from India to Korea to China, sex ratios in societies have been thrown off. The statistics are staggering. In one hospital, from June 1976 to June 1977, 700 individuals sought prenatal sex determination. Of these fetuses, 250 were determined to be male and 450 were female. While all of the male fetuses were kept to term, 430 of the 450 female fetuses were aborted.⁶ More recent studies of India have continued to confirm the growing imbalance of males and females within India and the entire Asian continent.⁷

⁵ K. Burke, “Dramatism,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David Sills (Crowell, Collier and Macmillan, 1968), 7:447-48.

⁶ B. Miller, *The Endangered Sex: The Neglect of Female Children in Rural India* (Ithaca NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981).

⁷ J. Terzieff, “Indian Women Trapped in Culture of Contempt/Female Fetuses Aborted even in Wealthy Families,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 December 2002, p. J1; L.M. Kohm, “Sex Selection Abortion and the Boomerang Effect of a Woman’s Right to Choose: A Paradox of the Skeptics,” *William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, 4/1 (1996): 91-128; V. M. Hudson and A.D.

Boer, "A Surplus of Men, a Deficit of Peace: Security and Sex Ratios in Asia's Largest States," *International Security* (Spring 2002): 5.

Recently, the government of China passed laws making it illegal to discriminate in this way with abortion technology.⁸ This is a surprising reversal, given previous government statements that such abortions of sex-selection never took place. The manifest reality of a society facing a growing dearth of females has compelled the population control interests within the Chinese government to acknowledge this discrimination and try to rule against it. The larger policy of reproduction, limiting families to one child, remains unchanged by the government. The increasing absence of women's bodies is linked with an increase in sex-trade activities globally as men resort to prostitution to fulfill sexual gratification. The practice of prostitution is increasingly relying upon child sex-trade and compulsory sex-slave services.⁹

The persistence of the feminist vision is profound. An example of this persistence can be found in an article from 1994 detailing the barbaric consequences of sex-selection abortion. Despite the horrific impacts, the author concludes:

I would argue that the strategy of seeking legislative restriction of sex-selective abortions has not been effective in combating sex preference, and has decreased women's access to safe medical care. We need, rather, to attempt more broad-reaching strategies that will address the economic and cultural roots of the problem. One such strategy would be to advocate for female inheritance of parental property as an alternative to dowry, as well as sustained efforts to reduce the level of dowry. Such reforms will require more than legislative advocacy, but require changing cultural norms that affect women's position in society. Although sex-selective abortion is appalling, we must not minimize the tragedy of the millions of girls who are born every day, but were never meant to

⁸ "China Bans Sex-Selection Abortion," Xinhua News Agency, 22 March 2003.

⁹ Kohm (1997); Hudson & Boer (2002).

survive.¹⁰

¹⁰ R. Balakrishnan, "The Social Context of Sex Selection and the Politics of Abortion in India," in *Power and Decision: the Social Control of Reproduction* (Cambridge MA: Harvard School of Public Health, 1994), pp. 267-86.

As her last words on the topic, this feminist critic laments the deaths of women in the womb but says that this fact is overshadowed by a failure to kill more females that survived the sex-selection process in the womb. The profound echo of contradiction reverberates in this textual space of the *Harvard Law Review*.¹¹

The unspoken text of “abortion rights” is manifesting itself in the symbolic form of greater violence against women. The first iteration of this violence is the direct killing of female children in the womb.¹² These children have been discovered by reproductive technologies that identify their gender within a symbolic order that refuses to identify their humanity. In such a symbolic order the discrimination directed against the unborn female is rendered meaningless. The second iteration of this violence is social absence of women contributing to the emergence of patriarchal life patterns. As more societies have more men than women among them, the men tend to view the sexual scarcity of women as a just motive for prostitution. The scarcity is so acute that children are also drafted as slaves into the pattern of sexual abuse. The third iteration of this violence may yet be emerging. Democratic practices that accord one person one vote will find democratic societies favoring the preferences of men who hold a growing global plurality as abortion technology goes unchecked.¹³

¹¹ “Silence on Sex Selection,” *Washington Times*, 24 November 2003, <http://www.washtimes.com/op-ed/20031123-111635-7668r.htm>.

¹² See Terzieff (2002).

¹³ R. E. Blumner, “For the Sake of World Peace, Promote Women’s Equality,” *St. Petersburg Times* (Florida), 2 February 2003, p. 6D.

RHETORICAL ARTIFACT #2: TERRI SCHIAVO

Women who survive the linguistic sterility of the womb will not find an altogether welcoming existence in the world of those born. In the spring of 2005 a disabled woman named Terri Schiavo was thrust into a political maelstrom by her husband who sought to have her feeding tube withdrawn from her body. Charged by the law as her legal caretaker, Michael Schiavo decided after several years that he believed Terri would want the feeding tube to be removed.¹⁴ Michael was opposed in public by Terri's parents—the Schindlers. Despite actions by the governor, the U.S. Congress, and the President, court decisions ultimately upholding Michael's decision to remove the feeding tube prevailed. Over the next two weeks, Terri Schiavo was starved to death shortly before Easter. The particular instances of the case involved a spectacular media event that resulted in a huge public debate and commentary. The ramifications of the case seem significant since the practice was a more radical denial of treatment than recent decisions by legal bodies to deny life support such as breathing assistance. The decision to allow for a denial of food and water was significant in a larger struggle over the value of human life.

This artifact of public controversy seemed ripe for feminist commentary and action. Michael Schiavo was a husband who had left his brain-damaged wife to live with a new girlfriend and to father children by her. There have been substantial allegations of abuse by Michael against Terri during their marriage. Michael Schiavo would also receive substantial financial benefits upon the death of his wife. Essentially, the case indicated that a man was going to make a decision about a woman's body that would result in her death. The principal moral structure for upholding his decision-making power was the

¹⁴ A. Campo-Flores, "The Legacy of Terri Schiavo: One Woman's Journey from Marital Bliss to Medical Darkness—and the Forces that Made Her Story a Political and Ethical Watershed," *Newsweek* (2005) <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7306432/site/newsweek/page/1/>.

institution of marriage. Feminist critiques of marriage are abundant and have generally suggested that marriage is a patriarchal institution of domination suited to demeaning the interests of women.

Despite these likely pretexts, nothing was said by contemporary feminists in support of Terri Schiavo's dignity as a woman. At the height of the public controversy, one journalist examined major feminist web sites such as NOW, *feministmajority.org*, the Ms. Foundation for Women, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Women's Action for New Directions, and Women's Human Rights Net, and found that none of the web sites made any mention of Terri Schiavo.¹⁵ Women's Human Rights Net actually had a paper on women with disabilities that explained how such women are often marginalized—but the website made no mention of Terri Schiavo. As a matter of analogy, feminists seemed to accept the dependent status of Terri as a sub-human existence needing the superior consciousness of a husband that could abort her continued existence as “a houseplant.”¹⁶ Michael's attorney had described Terri in court arguments as comparable to a houseplant. The symbolically demeaned explanations of her human life became accepted as consistent with the feminist paradigm.

In contrast, the organization Feminists for Life issued a strongly worded statement from spokesperson Patricia Heaton in defense of Terri Schiavo's life. Moreover, the statement emphasized that Terri had dignity as a woman that must be protected from social interests that demean women:

“Feminists have always challenged the idea that married women have no rights of their own,” said Heaton. “A husband should not be granted absolute control over his wife's fate, especially a disaffected husband with dubious motives. Terri has parents whose unselfish desire is to simply love her, care for her and let her live. She is not in a comatose state and she is not suffering from terminal disease. Terri may no longer be perfect or complete but she has a fundamental

¹⁵ A. Cline, “Not Their Kind of Woman,” *National Review Online*, 28 March 2005. L. Carbone, “Material Girls: How Feminism Betrayed Terri Schiavo,” *BreakPoint*, 31 March 2004.

¹⁶ J. Gilmore, “Court-Ordered Euthanasia,” *The New American*, 4 April 2005.

right to life. Her feeding tube must be re-inserted.¹⁷

The statement stood in sharp contrast to the silence of traditional women's rights groups. The silence further empowered Michael Schiavo, Judge Greer, and the attorney of Michael Schiavo.

RHETORICAL ARTIFACT #3: TALIBAN TREATMENT OF WOMEN

Beginning in the 1990s, a powerful group of Muslim clerics known as the Taliban gained control of Afghanistan. The clerics instituted their own uniquely harsh vision of Sharia Islamic law across the nation. This legal vision involved specific strictures for women, including burqas, male escorts in public, and the denial of education. Moreover, the penalties for female misconduct were inhumane. The inhumanity of these strictures were celebrated at the Kabul soccer stadium where Taliban officials would compel male relatives to discharge AK-47s into the heads of their female relatives caught violating the Taliban's moral codes. These very public showings of brutality were designed to communicate symbolically the intrinsic inferiority of women and the need for absolute compliance with the Taliban's symbolic vision. Although the U.S. Government never recognized the Taliban as the legitimate rulers of the nation, the U.S. had no direct conflict with Afghanistan until a terrorist organization called Al Qaeda took up refuge

¹⁷ "Patricia Heaton Pleads for Terri Schiavo," Feminists for Life Statement on Terri Schiavo, 18 March 2005, available at: <http://www.feministsforlife.org/news/PHSchiavo3-18.htm>.

within that state. Beginning in the late 1990s, the Clinton administration launched missile attacks against Al Qaeda. On September 11, 2001 the simmering political tensions with Al Qaeda and the Taliban erupted into the devastating attacks on America. By October, the United States was at war with the government of Afghanistan.

For feminists, the war against Afghanistan resulted in a rhetoric designed to critique the practice of war. They suggested that war was a barbaric impulse for revenge. More diplomatic and precise means for resolving the conflict were encouraged. Little or nothing was said by feminists during the war about the patriarchal hatred directed at women in Afghanistan. In a LEXIS-NEXIS search of hundreds of American newspapers for the past year I found only five articles mentioning feminism and the Taliban. Much was said about the imprecision and cruelty of American war planners.

An example of this can be provided from the work of a leading Canadian feminist professor. As a women's studies professor and former head of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, Thobani is considered a leading voice of contemporary Canadian feminism. Thobani believes that the U.S. "is the most dangerous and the most powerful global force unleashing horrific levels of violence." She states, further, that "there will be no emancipation for women anywhere on this planet until the western domination of this planet is ended" and that the West represents "the most heinous form of patriarchal racist violence that we're seeing on the globe today."¹⁸

The emerging subtext of this commentary is the inherent worthlessness of women living under the Taliban. Feminists provided tacit acceptance of Taliban cruelty by withholding previous judgments about the cruelty of the Afghan government. American feminists provide a burqa-like shroud for the lives of women under the Taliban during the war against the Taliban. It is important to realize that feminists were not simply silent—as in the case of Terri Schiavo—they engaged the American military as a patriarchal project worthy of criticism. The critical feminist voice was directed against the use of military force by the American

¹⁸ M. Jacobs, "Feminism Was Hijacked," *Edmonton Sun*, 4 October 2001, p. 45.

policymakers.

RHETORICAL ARTIFACT #4: VAN GOGH KILLING IN THE NETHERLANDS

Since September 11, 2001 some effort has been made by social commentators to critique the treatment of women within some Muslim societies. One aggressive critique was made by the controversial Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh. After interviewing a woman named Hirsi Ali, who was victimized in a Muslim culture of Africa, Van Gogh created a short film detailing her experiences, including a narrative in her own voice entitled "Submission" (the word "Islam" means "submission"). Not long after this film was released, Van Gogh was murdered. The murderer left a letter pierced to his body by a knife.¹⁹ *The Guardian* provided the following description of the murder:

¹⁹ "Dutch Filmmaker Theo Van Gogh Murdered," *ABC News*, 2 November 2004.

On November 2, while cycling to work on a busy Amsterdam street, Theo van Gogh was shot eight times by a young, bearded man wearing a long jellaba. The portly film-maker staggered onwards and twice begged for mercy as his assailant approached. According to witnesses, van Gogh emitted the peculiarly Dutch plea, "Surely we can talk about this?" It was a dismal end for this ribald controversialist.... The assassin drew two butcher's knives, slitting Van Gogh's throat to the spine with one and, with the other, pinning a letter to his chest. "Ayaan Hirsi Ali, you will break yourself to pieces on Islam," the letter, written in Dutch, declared amid a garbled discourse about a Jewish conspiracy in Holland. "You, oh America, will go down," it climaxed. "You, oh Europe, will go down . . . You, oh Netherlands, will go down . . . You, oh Hirsi Ali, will go down."²⁰

The letter explained that Van Gogh's explanations about Muslim cruelty toward women would not be tolerated and that others who chose to speak in this way would meet a similar brutal fate. Having taken place within the European cradle of tolerance, the Netherlands, the crime shocked and horrified many.

Within the immediate community, members of the Dutch society painted a mural of a dove and the words "Thou Shalt Not Kill" as its text. A judge in the Netherlands ordered that the mural be removed when local Muslims found the mural to be offensive in its religious references to the ten commandments. There was not a precipitous global outcry against the killing. The world seems to continue holding its breath about how this could happen. Feminists make no reference to this artist's murder or the state of hiding into which the film's subject has now been forced.

The subtext emerging from this silence is a common alliance against the War on Terror. The initial resistance to the War on Terror in the fall of 2001 became a global movement once the United States expanded its war into Iraq. The global movement had in its membership

²⁰ A. Linklater, "G2: Danger Woman," *The Guardian* (London), 17 May 2005, p. 2.

the Western feminist movement that continued to critique war by Western states as a patriarchal practice. The War on Terror became the overriding focus of public criticism.

Symbolic attention to the murder of Van Gogh would tend to re-enforce negative stereotypes of Muslims and likely perpetuate rationales for the war on terror. Van Gogh's dead body became a text upon which feminists could write of their own passionate feelings about war, and his meaningful existence could serve as a contrasting background to the substantive work of stopping war. *The Guardian* effectively summarizes the view of contemporary intellectuals:

Influenced by the events of September 11, however, [Hirsi Ali] began to publish articles arguing that Islam was not capable of integrating into a society that was itself not very good at integration. Furthermore, she concluded, if you looked into the condition of women in Muslim communities, you found an intractable problem, one which liberals and multiculturalists refused to address. "I called it the paradox of the left," she says. "On the one hand, they support ideals of equality and emancipation, but in this case they do nothing about it; they even facilitate the oppression."²¹

The subtext of Ali's life continues to surface. Ali has recognized that a multi-cultural fundamentalism has come to control much of Western consciousness. She recently explained the problem to a French press outlet:

In their eyes [the political left], the simple fact of belonging to a minority gives one the right to do anything. This multiculturalism is a disaster. All one has to do is scream "discrimination" and all doors are open to you. Scream "racism" and your opponents shut up. But multiculturalism is an inconsistent theory. If one wants to let communities preserve their traditions, what happens when these traditions work to the detriment of women or homosexuals? The logic of multiculturalism amounts to accepting the subordination of women. Nonetheless, the defenders of multiculturalism do not want to admit it.²²

²¹ Linklater (2005).

²² H. Ali, "Le problème, c'est le Prophète et le Coran," *L'Express du* (16 May 2005).

The equality of all cultures supersedes a capacity to recognize distinct cultural strategies of oppression. Ali's effort to articulate on behalf of voiceless Muslim women was met with the indifferent chants of the West's multicultural clerics.

CONCLUSION: CONTEMPORARY FEMINISM

REIFIES SOCIAL PRACTICES THAT HARM WOMEN

In the twenty-first century contemporary feminist organizations like the National Organization of Women have become complicit in symbolic orders that not only demean women but literally annihilate them. Whether women are in the womb being scanned by ultrasounds, resting comfortably in hospice care as feeding tubes are removed, shrouded in the intimidating spaces of a burqa at the point of a gun, they find themselves today in a symbolic order that seeks to obscure their dignity. "Reproductive rights" and "control of my body" and promises to make "peace not war" eclipse the intrinsic worth of women's lives. In the silences of feminists, injustices against women are growing. The contemporary nature, geographic range, and political variability of these artifacts suggest that the silence of liberal feminism is not occasional or idiosyncratic. The silences of liberal feminists disempower and devalue women. It is the task of those interested in communication practices to give voice to the voiceless and re-establish the dignity of human life.